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Perils of Being the Prosecutor

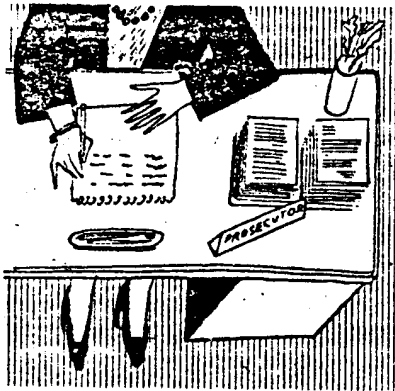
By PHILIP TAUBMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 27 — The call to the United States Attorney's office from the neighborhood school here last spring was succinct. School authorities said that two men who had been parked outside all morning might be planning to kidnap the daughter of a Federal prosecutor, E. Lawrence Barcella Jr.

The idea seemed plausible. Mr. Barcella's chief occupation was prosecuting two former American intelligence agents charged with illegally aiding Libyan terrorists. The pursuit of the two men, Edwin P. Wilson and Frank E. Terpil, had produced at least one previous threat against Mr. Barcella.

The alarm from the school was flashed to a law enforcement command center and within minutes several dozen Federal agents and local



police officers rushed to the school.

The two men, it turned out, were undercover policemen from the District of Columbia vice squad who were staking out a nearby house looking for a suspect in a sex offense case.

He Needs Sense of Humor

Mr. Barcella, according to his friends, recounts the story with a certain amount of gallows humor. After five years on the Wilson case, they say he needs it. Two weeks ago, the Government charged that Mr. Wilson, while incarcerated in New York last year, developed a plan to pay a professional killer \$1 million to assassinate Mr. Barcella, his fellow prosecutor, Carol E. Bruce, and five Government witnesses.

Even by Washington standards, where Federal prosecutors often find themselves pursuing high-powered intrigue in celebrated cases, the investigation and prosecution of Mr. Wilson have been unusual. With death threats, international manhunts and labyrinthine intelligence connections,

the case has drawn Mr. Barcella and Mrs. Bruce into provinces usually inhabited by the characters in a Robert Ludlum thriller.

Naturally, Mr. Wilson, a former Central Intelligence Agency operative, has gotten most of the attention as the case has unfolded. On Monday, Mr. Barcella and Mrs. Bruce should finally get their day in court. Nearly three years after Mr. Wilson was indicted, and nine months after his capture, he is scheduled to go on trial in Federal District Court here on charges that he conspired to assassinate a Libyan dissident living in exile in Egypt. Later he will be tried on charges that he illegally shipped explosives to Libya for use in a terrorist training program.

Others Handled Earlier Trials

In recent trials in Virginia and Texas, Mr. Wilson was convicted of illegally shipping still other explosives and weapons to Libya. Although Mr. Barcella and Mrs. Bruce helped prepare and supervise the prosecution, those cases were handled by assistant United States attorneys in Alexandria, Va., and Houston.

Mr. Barcella and Mrs. Bruce, in many ways, are an unlikely team. He is impulsive and excitable; she is methodical and calm. He is chronically disorganized; she is painstakingly precise. His office always looks as if it were just hit by a gale, with legal papers and phone messages spilling off the edge of his desk. Her papers are neatly stacked or filed.

Charles F.C. Ruff, who was their boss when he served as United States Attorney in Washington, says the two prosecutors complement each other. "They make a good team," he said. The two prosecutors declined to be interviewed.

Mr. Barcella, who is the senior member of the team, is considered a skilled courtroom lawyer but is best known as an investigator. "Larry enjoys the chase," a former colleague said. "He's got a cops-and-robbers mentality. He's also willing to take chances, to try unorthodox ideas."

'Asset Is His Imagination'

Mr. Barcella, according to colleagues, constantly bubbles with ideas. "One of Larry's greatest assets is his imagination," said Donald E. Campbell, head of the major-crimes unit in the United States attorneys' office.

Unorthodox ideas played a significant role in the Wilson investigation, in which Mr. Barcella and Mrs. Bruce coordinated the work of investigative agents from half a dozen Federal agencies. The best example of risk-taking was the elaborate trap set by the Justice Department to lure Mr.

The plan, which Mr. Barcella pushed despite the doubts of associates and superiors, involved authorizing a former associate of Mr. Wilson to draw the fugitive defendant into a series of business deals and apparent contacts with the Reagan Administration, most illusory, that were designed to get Mr. Wilson to leave Libya.

The former associate, a New York businessman, Ernest R. Keiser, claimed intelligence credentials himself, including experience in the Middle East and South America, but these proved difficult to pin down, according to Justice Department officials.

More than a few senior Justice Department officials were dubious about sending Mr. Keiser in pursuit of Mr. Wilson, but Mr. Barcella insisted the idea could work. He was right. Last June, Mr. Wilson, apparently believing he was headed for a rendezvous with a White House national security official, flew to the Dominican Republic with Mr. Keiser. Dominican authorities, alerted by the United States, promptly placed Mr. Wilson on the next nonstop flight to New York, where he was arrested.

Mr. Barcella, who is 37, is deputy head of the major crimes unit. He honed his investigative skills by handling narcotics cases and other traditional local felony cases in Washington early in his career as a Federal prosecutor.

A graduate of Dartmouth College and Vanderbilt Law School, Mr. Barcella, who was born and reared in Washington, joined the prosecutor's office in 1970 as a clerk. He played a big role in planning a complex sting operation here in the mid-1970's in which Federal agents posed as criminal middlemen to "fence" stolen goods in the Washington area. The operation was widely copied and led to extensive undercover work by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, including the Abscam case, in which an F.B.I. agent posing as an Arab sheik paid bribes to a number of Congressmen.

Mr. Barcella's first exposure to a major international case with intelligence connections came in the Government's investigation of the 1976 assassination in Washington of the former Chilean Ambassador, Orlando Letelier. Investigators ultimately determined that the killing was the work of the Chilean intelligence agency.

"The Letelier case taught Larry about dealing with foreign governments and the shadowy world of intelligence," a former colleague said. Mr.

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